Words to Fit the Purpose

Have you ever glanced at a legal contract—or a technical manual? If so, you know that such documents rely on precise word choice and specific terminology to make meaning unambiguous. This kind of word choice is very different from what you would expect in a movie script, poem, or picture book. And that's because they are written for totally different purposes. As you will see in this lesson, good word choice sometimes means striving for unmistakable clarity—and it sometimes means creating word pictures in the reader's mind. Both are important goals—but they're not interchangeable.

Two Examples—Two Purposes

The following two examples show how much word choice can fluctuate with purpose. Example 1 is from a cookbook. The recipe is written with clear, precise terms to help the reader understand *exactly* how to bake a cake. Example 2 is a descriptive piece, in which the writer chooses words that will convey his passion for the beach.

Example 1

Read the following passage carefully and <u>underline</u> any examples of clear wording that would help a reader know *exactly* how to make a chocolate cake. We underlined two examples to give you the idea.

Delectably-Chocolate Chocolate Cake

1. <u>Preheat</u> the oven to 350 degrees. <u>Liberally grease and flour</u> two 9-inch round baking pans. Put these pans aside for now.

2. In a large bowl, whisk together the sugar, flour, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, and salt until everything is evenly blended. Once mixed, add in the eggs, milk, oil, and vanilla. With an electric mixer, beat batter on *medium* speed until thoroughly mixed, about 2 minutes. Scrape sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula as needed. The batter should be thick and blended. Pour contents into prepared pans.

3. Bake 30 to 35 minutes. A wooden toothpick inserted into the center should come out clean. Let cool 10 minutes. Remove from pans to wire racks, cool completely, frost, and enjoy!

Example 2

This time as you read, <u>underline</u> any descriptive wording that helps you picture the scene—or understand the writer's feelings. Again, we underlined two examples to give you the idea.

The Ocean

For as long as I can remember, the beach has been *the* place I wanted to spend *my* summers. <u>I loved combing the surf</u> for <u>sun-bleached sand dollars</u>, pants rolled up under my knees, thick, wet sand oozing between my toes. Later, as the sun melted into the sea, we'd overeat, stuffing ourselves with butter-dripping clams steamed in salty water, then golden marshmallows toasted over a driftwood fire.

It was here, in the ocean's pounding surf and in the salty tidal waters of nearby rivers, that I learned to fish and to love paddling around in our family's red, weather-beaten canoe. No matter how many times I follow the familiar tree-lined road from my house in town to the ocean, I still love that moment when we crest the hill, pop out of the forest and—just like that—there it is. My breath catches, as if I'm seeing that impossibly vast expanse of water for the first time. Regardless of the weather—eye blinding sunshine or clouds thick as cotton batting—I get the same lump in my throat, and I hear the tide even before I actually *see* the ocean.

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in a writing circle to share your underlined words from the two examples. Identify your favorites. Then talk about *different kinds* of good word choice. What kinds of words was the writer of the chocolate cake recipe reaching for? How about the writer of the piece about the ocean? Is it appropriate for their word choices to be very different?

Warming Up

Following are two sentences that need your help. In each case, the writer has settled for bland language—or omitted details that would fill in the picture by answering readers' questions. Read each sentence carefully. Think about the writer's *purpose.* Then

- underline vague words.
- rewrite the sentence, using vivid words that fit the purpose well.

Don't be afraid to invent. You're a writer—that's your job. We did one example to show you what we had in mind.

Example Revision

Before: Leslie <u>went</u> down to the lake.

Purpose: To set the stage for an adventure story

After: Just at dawn, Leslie slipped out of bed and headed quietly to the edge of the small mountain lake to watch the trout jumping.

HINT: Remember, this isn't JUST about replacing a weak word with a stronger one. It's also about using language that goes with the writer's purpose.

Your Turn

1. **Before:** The views are good.

   Purpose: To create a compelling brochure for visitors to New York

   After: _____

   _____

   _____

2. **Before:** The unusual sea creature does some interesting things to get food.

   Purpose: To open Chapter 1 of a fourth grade science textbook

   After: _____

   _____

   _____

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner to share your revised sentences. Take turns reading your new sentences aloud. Even though you reached for different words (and probably different ideas), did you manage to give clarity and voice to your writing? Did your words suit the purpose?

Ready, Set . . . *Reach!*

It's time to start a draft of your own. Take a minute to decide if you'd rather write

- a how-to piece (like the cake recipe),
- a description (like the paragraphs about the beach), OR
- a poem (on any original idea of your own).

Regardless of your topic or purpose, take a few minutes to create a word web. Place your main idea in the middle of the web, then brainstorm and write as many words or phrases as you can think of to bring readers inside your thinking. Choose words that will help readers either (1) follow your directions, (2) picture something you are describing, or (3) tune in to your feelings. Add as many circles as you need.
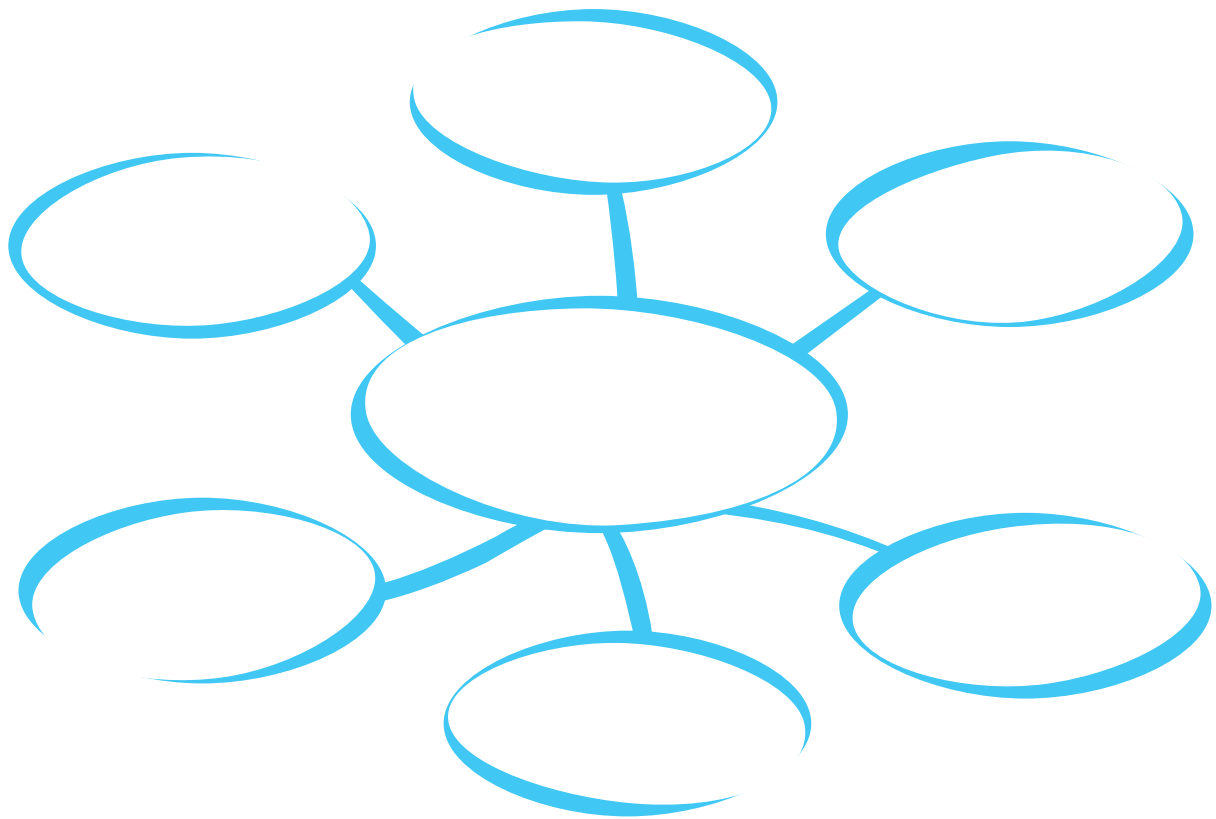
As soon as you finish your web, begin writing—and keep writing for 10-15 minutes. Keep the ideas flowing. Have a conversation with your reader.

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in a writing circle to share your drafts. As each writer finishes reading, share a favorite word or phrase from his or her writing and talk about the match between word choice and purpose. Is it strong?

A Writer's Questions

A writer who is creating a poem might be playful or even daring with language. Could this sometimes be a good idea in a recipe, or any informational piece of writing? Why or why not?

Putting It to the Test

Give some writers a thesaurus, and they'll use it to look up every other word they write. In a writing assessment, is this a good idea? Should you try hard to impress your readers with the biggest, fanciest words you can find?